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ABSTRACT

An in-depth examination of restructuring is provided in this policy brief, which shows how the meaning of "restructuring" changes according to the setting and participants involved. After a review of the current context of the restructuring movement, different types of reform efforts are described, which include restructuring of curriculum, instruction, and time; authority; provision of youth services; public financing; and student assessment. Examples of school and district restructuring efforts in Arizona, California, Nevada, and Utah and other states are described. A critical discussion of political, organizational, and technical/financial constraints to restructuring concludes that school and district goals, resources, and political and organizational contexts must be considered prior to deciding the extent and nature of educational change. (17 references) (LMI)

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Beyond the Rhetoric of Restructuring

Mary Amsler

Introduction

In the current rhetoric of school reform, most if not all efforts to improve public schools employ the term restructuring. Yet the meaning of this term changes with the setting in which it is used and the people who use it.

This Policy Brief begins with a review of the current context of the movement to restructure schools, followed by descriptions of different types of restructuring efforts. These descriptive analyses form the basis for a critical discussion of the organizational, structural, and technical impediments to genuine restructuring.

The Context for Restructuring

By invoking excellence through higher standards, the first wave of educational reform in the early 1980s neglected educational practice. Instead, states developed broad mandates such as increased graduation requirements and longer school days. The second wave of reform in the late 1980s focused more specifically on the school as the unit of change. The empowerment of practitioners and alternative modes of student assessment were representative of the kinds of change policymakers considered. This more radical approach to school reform has come to be widely referred to as *restructuring*.

The aim of restructured schools is to improve the academic performance of all students. Change is to occur not only through attracting and keeping top quality teachers, but also through the empowerment of parents and school practitioners, so that they may become involved in the school decision making process. Restructuring also entails changes in the ways schools are governed, in instructional methods and curricular organization, and in the assessment of student progress.

Types of Restructuring Efforts

Policymakers need to be aware of the different activities associated with the term restructuring because different conceptions of the term carry quite different implications for the organization of schools. The major forms of restructuring currently being promoted are described below.

Restructuring Curriculum, Instruction, and Time. Analysts hoping to restructure curriculum and instruction worry that a fragmented set of curricular goals and attempts by teachers to "cover" material prevents meaningful learning experiences. The fear is that students currently receive too few opportunities to explore subject matter in depth or to have meaningful learning experiences.

Advocates of restructuring argue that promoting more desirable processes for learning requires substantial changes in both method and structure. Fostering the use of teaching strategies that emphasize cooperation, interdisciplinary analysis, peer and cross-tutoring, and higher order thinking skills will require varied forms of staff development and increased flexibility regarding the length and nature of class periods. Teachers in restructured schools could work in teams, teach more than one discipline and work with students for longer than 55 minute periods.

Restructuring Authority: School-Based Decision Making and Teacher Professionalism. Frequently, restructuring is equated with plans to promote site-based decision making and/or teacher professionalism. Though the concepts are different, they are interrelated. Unlike earlier proposals that advocated decentralization on the grounds that bureaucrats poorly represented the needs of schools and students, current plans for site-based decision making stem from the viewpoint that centralized decision making is inefficient.

Central to most plans is the belief that new roles must be as-

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sumed. The central office, the state, and the federal government will still set broad goals, ensure compliance with legal mandates, and monitor results. However, in restructured schools, their emphasis will shift from guiding and evaluating change to supporting the actions of school based practitioners. Site administrators and particularly teachers will assume much greater responsibility for allocating funds, designing schedules, hiring personnel, developing curricula, and choosing textbooks. Rather than behaving as technicians who carry out orders in isolation, teachers who participate in site based decision making will work collectively. The role of principal will shift back to its historical role — that of a principal teacher who provides instructional leadership.

Parental involvement will also increase. As parents are offered more meaningful ways to participate in decision making, schools will come to better represent parent concerns and the needs of the community.

Restructuring the Provision of Services to Youth. Advocates argue that the current system is fragmented and fails to coordinate available services such as health, family counseling, and welfare in a way which provides children dependable support. Reformers hope that by offering children integrated services at school that children will receive comprehensive support in a more efficient manner. The challenge of successfully integrating services is, however, considerable. Agencies frequently fail to talk with each other, professional training is highly specialized, and confidentiality laws frequently inhibit the sharing of information.

Restructuring Public Financing: Schools of Choice. Choice proposals have been advanced for many reasons and have taken different forms. The specific nature of choice plans vary considerably. Generally, choice proponents want to provide students with vouchers that can be used at independent as well as public schools. Choice advocates hope that schools will be forced to compete for students and that the resulting market forces will increase quality.

Many policymakers worry about the impact of choice on the ability of schools to offer equality of opportunity. They worry that choice will enable private schools to fund their programs while only serving the most academically talented, or the richest students. Other, "less desirable" students will be left without desirable options. Critics worry that students who lack active advocates in the home will not have the information or motivation to promote their best interests. Others worry about the financial impact of choice programs and about transferring support from public programs to private schools. During this period of scarce resources, choice critics question the wisdom of asking the government to pay for the education of all the students who are currently enrolled in private schools (roughly 10 percent of the student population).

Restructuring Student Assessment. Many policymakers argue that our means of assessment are inadequate because they fail both to provide adequate measures of school performance and to clearly articulate a set of goals for students. Proponents of restructuring assessment envision devices that can do more than monitor outcomes. They believe that the right assessment tools can steer practitioners in productive directions and that these measures can help to articulate goals which are consistent with the needs of a highly technological democratic society. Increasingly, policymakers are coming to believe that use of standardized tests to guide curriculum decreases the quality of instruction. In response to these concerns, states and districts are beginning to examine the potential of a new type of assessment known as authentic assessment or performance assessment. The tasks used in authentic assessments are complex, integrated, and challenging. The assessments are designed to mirror good instruction. This new technology , however, is still insufficiently developed to provide the kind of standardized comparisons that we have come to expect from standardized tests.

Examples of School and District Level Restructuring Efforts

The following examples do not represent all the projects that fall under the broad umbrella term of restructuring. They are efforts which have received national attention for their innovative design and effectiveness.

Coalition of Essential Schools. Ted Sizer from Brown University designed the Coalition of Essential Schools (CES) by drawing on the research he completed for his book *Horace's Compromise* (1984). In the last seven years more than 50 middle level and high schools have joined CES. This organization pushes schools to redefine teaching and learning with regard to the content being taught, the ways student assessment is accomplished by school faculty and staff, and the relationships at the school between and among educators, students, and parents.

CES schools follow nine common principles: 1) Essential schools focus on helping students learn to use their minds well; 2) Goals are simple and clear; each student should master a limited number of skills and knowledge areas following the overriding philosophy that "less is more;" 3) The goals apply to all students, with no distinctions such as gifted and talented, or remedial; 4) Teaching and learning are personalized with no teacher responsible for more than 80 stu-

dents; 5) The student must be the "worker" and be responsible for the learning process rather than solely emphasizing the "teacher-as-deliverer-of-instructional-services." Coaching is the primary instructional technique in pushing students to learn how to learn; 6) Rather than traditional tests, student assessment and promotion depends on successful mastery of subjects through an "exhibition" showing an understanding of certain skills and knowledge; 7) The stress is on "unanxious" expectations, trust, and decency; 8) The principal and teachers serve as generalists and specialists, and take on multiple roles as teacher/counselor/manager; and 9) Essential schools strive to have loads of 80 students per teacher, time for collective planning among teachers, competitive salaries, and per pupil costs no more than 10 percent higher than those at traditional schools.

Miami Dade County Schools. Miami Dade County focuses its restructuring efforts on school governance through shared decision making with the belief that school site involvement is essential to effective change. Schools participating in the shared decision making pilot program receive their school budget and decide how to disperse it. They also receive special staff development funds for needs specific to their sites. Other change projects include Saturday classes, mini-sabbatical programs of seminars and clinics for teachers, and tuition stipends for teachers pursuing advanced degrees who transfer to schools where they would be a racial minority.

San Diego City Schools. In 1987, the Schools of the Future Commission of the San Diego City Schools issued five recommendations for restructuring their schools: 1) create a new schools-community coalition, 2) begin a fundamental restructuring of schools, 3), integrate technology into future schools, 4) expand second language and world studies curricula, and 5) secure a long term funding base for schools. In the ensuing four years the district has focused its efforts on school based management, new instruction and assessment techniques, and developing schools with coordinated social service delivery.

Parent and Community Restructuring Efforts. Several restructuring programs are focused on improving parent and community involvement in schools and schooling. James Comer from Yale University has established schools in districts across the country that focus on early childhood development and approaches that teachers, parents, and social service providers can take to meet the diverse needs of children in these schools. Henry Levin from Stanford University has established the Accelerated Schools program where all children share a highly enriched school curriculum. An essential component of Accelerated Schools is parental involvement in all aspects of the school's operation. Finally, the Chicago Public Schools most recently decentralized into neighborhood districts, governed by parent-teacher councils that have direct control over school budgets, hiring and firing of school personnel, and curricula.

Examples of State Level Restructuring Efforts in Our Region

Arizona: The legislature is presently providing support for sixteen schools involved in restructuring efforts. The schools have complete regulatory flexibility. Emphasis is on ungraded first to eighth grades, the integration of technology into the classroom, interdisciplinary teaching, parental involvement and year-round schooling. Districts with large numbers of at-risk students have been able to apply for additional funding.

California: The state legislature passed legislation in 1990 to establish a demonstration of restructuring in public education geared towards improving student learning. The legislation, SB 1274, encourages educators in schools to devise new ways to improve student learning. The demonstration program involves two stages. The first is a planning stage to develop a restructuring proposal. This will be followed by the implementation of the demonstration project. From the 1,499 submitted proposals, 220 schools received funding in 1991 to plan a systemic restructuring of their learning process. The bill emphasizes four essential elements to be included in submitted plans: 1) curriculum, instruction, and assessment, 2) changes in the roles of school site personnel and parents, 3) the use of technology in the schools, and 4) projects proposing opportunities for 11th and 12th graders to attend classes in other settings such as universities or special training programs and/or to participate in internship programs.

Nevada: Accountability legislation was passed during the 1989 session which requires school districts to submit a district-level report to the state superintendent and the legislature outlining district-level goals, student achievement scores, and fiscal information on an annual basis. A 1989 iniative to reduce class size has focused staff development on instructional activities for smaller classes as well as training in the new science and mathematics curriculum standards.

Utah: A statewide strategic planning process which incorporates the national education goals is being implemented through state and local action plans. One recommendation is to develop individualized education plans for every student guided by the statewide core curriculum. Criterion-referenced assessments have been developed to determine to what extent schools are meeting

curricular objectives. Public report cards that measure district performance against expected scores are issued to members of the community in each school district and are reported statewide. Districts that meet certain standards receive their state funding through a block grant, while the Governor's Schools of Excellence program provides monetary awards annually to twenty outstanding schools.

Constraints of Restructuring

The persistent shortcoming of previous reform efforts means policymakers should think critically about the design of restructuring efforts. What follows are potential problems that may be encountered by both policymakers and practitioners.

Political Barriers

Restructuring aims to alter significantly the roles of teachers and principals as well as state and district personnel. The willingness of this range of actors to go along with these changes is less clear. Analysts worry that actors representing these different groups will focus more on fighting for what they take to be their best interests than on promoting policies to meet students' needs. A number of forces combine to constrain the desire of many to assume these new roles. First, some of these shifts are perceived as threats that might adversely alter the status and power associated with different jobs. For example, some teachers might be hesitant to assume responsibility for additional administrative decisions without additional compensation. District administrators might be hesitant to give up control over certain procedures, believing their experience make them uniquely qualified decisions-makers. Those interested in promoting restructuring need to consider carefully the ways in which their plans effect different groups and what steps can be taken to foster these actors' support for systemic change.

The actions of political leaders may raise other identifiable political barriers to restructuring. Efforts to restructure schools, supported by many political figures, may conflict with politicians' desire to both monitor and influence educational practice. Many analysts, for example, believe that the national goals proposed by the nation's Governors may lead to a national test and curriculum. Though such changes may offer politicians a chance to demonstrate their concern for education, it is possible that these tests may also constrain the ability of educators to develop practices adapted to the needs of students with whom they work. A worry is that as states and the Federal government take a more active interest in education, more, rather than less, bureaucratic regulations will follow in the form of programmatic requirements and monitoring mechanisms. Such actions may constrain local attempts to provide practitioners the flexibility necessary for developing practices that are most appropriate for their local contexts.

What is required is that educational leaders be attentive to the potential conflict between both centralized assessment and regulation, on the one hand, and school-based flexibility on the other. Harnessing the concern of political leaders and finding ways to assess and guide performance without constraining local actors will be a major challenge for those committed to restructuring.

Organizational Barriers

Because of the interdependent nature of much that goes on in schools, truly restructuring schools will be an enormous task. One of the major weaknesses of early attempts at restructuring has been a failure to appreciate and accommodate the complexity of these interdependencies. Successful proposals for restructuring must carefully attend to these systemic relationships and the impact of changes in one part of the system on actors in other parts of the educational system. However, a cautious, "go slow" stance may not be the answer. Given these interdependent relationships, some proponents of restructuring worry that changing only one or two aspects of the system may not lead to the desired results. For example, it is questionable what changes in decision making procedures can accomplish if not accompanied by shifts in curriculum and instruction. Early attempts to restructure have often been pushed by those who have equated school-based management with restructuring. These efforts have failed to foster changes in curriculum and instruction, to make strong connections to social and health service agencies, or to incorporate the district office in the process of change. Promoters of restructuring are caught in a bind. They will need to assess the potential limits of incremental attempts at restructuring against the possible costs of trying to move financially strapped and organizationally complex districts in too many directions at once.

A second organizational barrier stems from an inappropriate assumption common in the rhetoric surrounding restructuring. Much of the discussion emphasizes the need for schools to better respond to the "needs of students". However, it is not clear that even if all the different actors responded out of their concern for students that they would all support the same goals or recommend the same means of achieving those goals. A superintendent, for example, may be more interested in the opinions of business leaders and school board members than a teacher. Similarly, teachers might be less moved by evidence relating to test scores and more attentive to more subjective measures of effectiveness. In short, different actors have different agendas. At times, these varied priorities may become a barrier to change. Those preparing

to restructure schools need to think carefully to find ways actors with differing roles and responsibilities can work effectively together.

Genuine organizational change is not easy. Educators may reject large and risky changes. First, there is widespread acceptance of the structures that currently characterize modern schools — the status quo. Few people wonder about the appropriate length of an individual class. Forty to fifty-five minute class periods are widely accepted as appropriate. Similarly, though proposals for interdisciplinary studies strike many as intriguing, few question the desirability of having special classes devoted to English, social studies, math, or science. In addition, the public rarely worries when schools separate students according to their age, award students grades, or give students a diploma at the end of twelfth grade. As long as educators adhere to these norms it is easier for educators to hold students responsible for their performance and to insulate themselves from criticism. Educators who stray from these norms, however, leave themselves vulnerable to criticism if their programs don't produce desirable results or if their schools appear disorderly.

Particularly problematic is the fact that it may take five to seven years for the successes or failures of restructuring to be identified. Yet policymakers who are staking great hope in these efforts may not be able to wait that long for results. Given the powerful impact of schools on children and Americans' desires for quick results, the risks of restructuring reforms may seem large to many educational leaders. In order to build enthusiasm for a change of this magnitude, restructuring proponents need to make the necessity of change clear. They must argue that the greatest risks lie in acceptance of the status quo and they must convince both the public and the education community that current methods are failing. Advocates also will need to refrain from claims that will quickly prove false: that mistakes in restructuring can be avoided or that the pay-off will be quick.

Technical and Financial Barriers

In some important respects educators lack the technical and financial support necessary to implement these plans. The kinds of shifts in roles and responsibilities discussed above will demand a substantial commitment. Attempts to bring about changes on numerous levels in school systems that are already short of resources will be difficult. Preparing individuals to fulfill these new roles effectively will take a significant amount of time for training and reflection. Administrators will probably need help making a transition from directors to facilitators and technical assistants. They must consider, for example, which decisions and responsibilities they must or should still control and which decisions teachers and/or parents are better suited to address. Similarly, teachers and others who will be asked to participate in the decision making process will need time to consider possible directions and possible ways of achieving these goals. Other responsibilities facing teachers need to be lessened when teachers assume major new decision making roles since the vast majority of teachers and administrators are already pressed for time. Restructuring efforts won't last if the additional responsibilities associated with cooperative forms of decision making resulted in improved school planning at the expense of time spent planning for lessons or commenting on students' work. Furthermore, it is one thing to propose that all students be presented with challenging and engaging material — it is quite another to achieve this goal. Our failures do not stem solely from poorly identified goals or from a lack of will. Learning how to employ new pedagogical strategies to make students more active learners requires time for reflection and training. Bringing about meaningful change through restructuring requires that promoters think about ways of supporting the efforts of individuals who must bring about change in the schools.

That we currently lack the technology to assess systematically many of the new curricular goals (for example, higher order thinking skills) is cause for concern. Many who support empowerment do so only as long as those who are empowered are held accountable for the results. If standard multiple choice tests are used to promote accountability, we may end up rewarding only those who teach the kind of isolated factual knowledge that reformers feel is inadequate. Proponents of restructuring need to pay close attention to assessment. If restructuring leads teachers to teach students in new ways and tests continue to measure the acquisition of particular facts, these tests may make successfully restructured schools look bad.

Conclusion

It is clear that restructuring efforts are setting the agenda of school reform in the 1990s. However, historical precedent and a tight fiscal environment make it seem likely that change will be slow and incremental. At the same time, there is a national consensus regarding the need for fundamentally redesigning America's public school system. Numerous states, schools, and now the federal government are embarking on ambitious efforts to significantly alter schooling practices.

The decision to pursue various aspects of the restructuring agenda are complex and dependent on many contextual factors. The challenges associated with change are numerous. While universal calls for restructuring may be politically advantageous, educators in certain

districts might proceed with caution. This is not to say that restructuring does not make sense for many, but decisions regarding the extent and nature of change pursued should be made after considering the goals of particular schools and districts, their available resources, and their political and organizational context.

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